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## Environment and neoliberalism: a critical discourse analysis of three Italian cases

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**Abstract:** In this paper we will examine the economic integration of environmental discourses using three examples chosen among the three main administrative levels of Italian State: central, regional and municipal. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis tools, an interdisciplinary research approach that combines linguistic analysis and social theory, the paper will analyze discursive strategies, interests at stake, use of language and changes of meanings. The selected texts will be interpreted as spaces of representation and social interaction, within an order of discourse dominated by the neoliberal frame.

**Keywords:** environment, economy, neoliberalism, critical discourse analysis, Italy

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*Environnement et néolibéralisme: une analyse critique du discours de  
trois cas italiens*

**Résumé :** Dans cet article nous examinerons l'intégration économique des discours environnementaux à partir de trois exemples choisis parmi les principaux niveaux administratifs de l'Etat italien : central, régional et municipal. Grâce à l'utilisation

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des outils de l'analyse critique du discours, approche de recherche interdisciplinaire qui combine l'analyse linguistique et la théorie sociale, l'article se focalisera sur l'analyse des stratégies discursives, des intérêts et des enjeux, de l'utilisation du langage et des changements du sens. Le corpus choisi sera considéré en tant qu'espace de représentation et d'interaction sociale, dans l'ordre du discours dominé par un cadre néolibéral.

**Mots-clés :** environnement, économie, néolibéralisme, *analyse critique du discours*, Italie

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### Introduction

Over recent decades, environmental concerns have become part of the political and economical agenda of all western democracies. The integration of ecological issues into neoliberalisation processes has had ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, production processes and trade have been partially regulated in order to prevent some of their impacts on ecosystem balances. On the other, ambiguous concepts such as environment and nature have been translated into an economic and monetary language.

This essay focuses on some aspects of the relation between neoliberalism and environmentalism, investigated at the level of discourses. Though within a two-way relationship, neoliberal narratives appear to have been able to assimilate environmental issues and to adjust them according to their own governmental frames. Whilst it is true that the exploitation of nature is not a contemporary phenomenon, a hallmark of today's world is its rhetorical concealments. The emergence of the environmentalist discourses has not only brought to light the problems concerning the health of the planet, but it has also provided some important rhetorical devices used to advantage purely economic interests. Stressing topics such as sustainable development and environment protection may be an artifice which legitimizes the subordination of environment to economy.

In order to analyse these aspects, we have selected three case studies. They deal with the three main administrative levels of the Italian State: central, regional and municipal. As for the first case we consider the short circuit between economic sustainability, public health and environmental risks. We analyse a normative document, Decree Law no. 69 of 21 June 2013. This act, strongly backed by the current government, was intended to revive the Italian economy, sorely tested by a long economic downturn. The second example addresses the difficult cohabitation between environment protection and economic development. We examine the institutional communication over the review of the Sardinian *Regional Landscape Plan*. In this case too, the political purpose is to revive the economy of a region facing a crisis situation, smoothing off the previous restrictions to preserve the

landscape heritage. For the third case, we study the press releases and some environmental information documents of a firm working in the field of energy. We deal with the debate on the health impact of a coal-fired power station situated in Vado Ligure, a municipality of Liguria, owned by the Italian energy champion Tirreno Power.

In this essay, we employ the conceptual and methodological tools relating to the area of Critical Discourse Studies. This is a multidisciplinary analysis approach which studies the relation between language and power. From the three cases examined, a risk has emerged: although the attention to eco-efficiency and sustainable development has seeped through neoliberal governmental patterns, some particular reasons (economic crisis, political power of construction lobbyists, business profit motive) show how simple it is to relapse into orthodox neoclassical and neoliberal frames. The following paragraph will introduce the relation between neoliberalism and environment, the third one is about Critical Discourse Analysis research perspective. In conclusion, we will examine some aspects of the difficult relation between economy and environment through the analysis of the three case studies.

### **1. Neoliberalism and environment**

In the long-term trajectories of western thought, the relation between man and nature is based on domination. Harvey (1996) sees a strong bond between Enlightenment ideals of collective and individual emancipation and a nature considered as a simple means to fulfil them. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century this relation of exploitation between an agent (the human beings) and an object (natural resources) has been exacerbated by liberal doctrines, which had been progressively developed as theoretical frame of the economic policies of the major European countries. The faith in the positive action of economic voluntary trade reduced the environment to one resource, available to be indefinitely shaped by human desires. The economic capitalistic system translated the nature in monetary terms, a commodity in *an immense accumulation of commodities*.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the emerging of environmental movements and the scientific alarms on ecosystem balances have undermined the positivistic faith towards an unlimited progress. The attention given to environmental issues has gained a prominent place in the public debate. In the Keynesian countries, politics and economy have begun to take into account the protection of ecological balances (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004; Girdwood, 2008). The environmental issue has been progressively institutionalised and has become a matter of public policy.

Over the last four decades, at a global level, there has been a progressive actualization of neoliberal economic and social doctrines (Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho,

2005; Gallino, 2011). Neoliberalisation processes have not been univocally established in the various geographic and political contexts (Smith, 1984; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Jessop, 2002; Holifield, 2004; Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). The complexity of this phenomenon has made clear the hiatus between the utopian formulae of its ideological base (Hayek, 1960; Friedmann, 1962) and the governmental architectures of advanced liberalism (Miller & Rose, 2008; Hindess, 2008). The dismantling of Keynesian economics was not followed by a simple *laissez-faire*. A complex set of reforms, safety devices and regulatory mechanisms shaped the adjustments and the local metamorphosis of neoliberalism (Colombo, 2013). The common element of these local variations lies in the idea that economic and social regulation must be attributed as far as possible to the action of market. Its dynamics, founded on competition and competitiveness, are seen as the most efficient way to allocate resources.

Looking at environmental problems, such conceptions, if fully implemented, lead to consider the impacts of economic activities on nature (air and water pollution, anthropogenic climate change, depletion of resources and so on) as social costs, external to the voluntary trading system. Faced with this situation, it's possible to continue to rely on market virtues. For instance, the Kyoto protocol on global warming, negotiated in 1997, was built around the optimistic forecasts of the Coase theorem (Coase, 1960), which assures that free trade can solve the problem of externalities (Oels, 2005; Liverman, 2009). This conviction integrates itself in what Harvey (1996) calls *standard view* of the environmental management in the context of advanced capitalist societies. The ecological problems are considered as accidents on the way to progress, to be taken on after their emergence. From this point of view, the environment can be modified indefinitely according to the needs of economic growth and capital accumulation. Vice versa we can assume that commodification of environment exposes to the risk of degradation and disappearing of natural resources. Polanyi (Polanyi, 1944) and O'Connor's (O'Connor's, 1998) analyses here highlight a limit of capitalist economy: without external regulation, the market exploits the conditions of economic production that cannot be reproduced, until they are exhausted.

The environmentalist discourse has integrated some key aspects of neoliberal governmentality: withdrawing from state competence sphere in favour of civil society and economic actors, deregulation, faith in the market self-regulation capacity (McCarthy, 2004), promotion in the individuals of an environmentally responsible behaviour (Agrawal, 2005). In fact, from the 1970s the discourses and the policies inspired by ecological modernization have emerged as a dominant frame (Hajer, 1995). Ecological modernization, as well as the ideologically analogous discourse concerning sustainable development, denies the existence of a trade-off between environment protection and the performances of economic systems. This is the case, for instance, of the relation between occupational levels and environmental protection laws. What has been for long an unsolvable conflict opposing

environment protection and economic system development has resulted in a positive-sum game. These reformist approaches do not question the foundations of capitalist society (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 1997). Furthermore, they normalize the voices of social and ecological movements and defuse the ethical political conflicts on the environment (Edwards & Usher, 2008; Girdwood, 2008). This reunification between environmentalism and economic needs has enabled an integration of some elements belonging to the ecologist thought within a neoliberal frame. Capitalism has become ethic (Barry, 2004) and green (Kahn, 2010). Enterprises must follow management patterns, protocols and certifications to assess impacts on the environment and limit them within a predetermined threshold.

Mediated by scientific expertise, some of the requests by ecological movements have partially occupied a place on the agenda of neoliberal regimes. This process has progressively channelled environmental concerns into a managerial treatment (Luke, 1999), with the purpose of making ecological risks manageable. It is the case of the securization of climate change that has been made governable by flexible and unstable governmentality strategies (Oels, 2013). Becoming governmental problems, environmental issues have been made calculable in terms of costs-benefits analysis (Harvey, 1996; Moreau & Gardin, 2010). Control, assessing and accountability techniques have led to partial reforms and regulations of the free market (Darier, 1999; Girdwood, 2008).

The concept of risk, referred also to the ecological concerns, has become fundamental in contemporary societies (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999; Dillon, 2008). The severity of ecological issues is recognized. They are systematically produced by human economic activities and they need a preventive approach. Technological progress and political reforms could, however, solve them in the medium term. Suitable regulations on market and trading activities would enable a sustainable economic development to safeguard natural resources for future generations (Laboy-Nieves, Schaffner, Abdelhadi & Goosen, 2009).

This neoliberal environmental-economic paradigm, which wants to combine protection and development, limits the relation man-nature to the market mechanisms, with a monetization of the value of the latter (McAfee, 1999). Nature is exploited not only as a productive resource. It is also handled and tamed for aesthetic and cultural needs, contained into gardens and “humanized” (Harvey, 1996). The progressive ideological, political and economic integration of the environmental issue (Alexander, 2009) has gone with its institutionalisation. This translation of nature into economic terms can be found also in the marketing and advertising techniques. Nature has become a mark to conquer new market niches. Sustainable products, styles of life and enterprises have been set up and developed. They are promoted with stratagems such as the use of the prefix “eco” or the adjective “green”. This is the case of eco-tourism, green certifications, natural cosmetics, green consumerism (Alexander, 2009). Public and private organisations

misappropriate environmental virtues to give a positive image of themselves, with a practice defined by Greer and Bruno (1996) as greenwashing. This integration of environmental discourses into the neoliberal frame, however, gives rise to rhetorical mechanisms that misfire, thus showing inconsistencies and short circuits in the match points among different discursive logics.

## 2. Critical discourse analysis and environmental discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach which has been developed from the 1990s. It combines linguistics with social theory. The adjective “critical” refers to the attention given to relations of power and domination, as they are expressed and built in the language (Fairclough, 1995). It is also through discourses that an unequal power-sharing is legitimized and perpetuated (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1997; Jäger, 2001). Taking a critical view of discourses means revealing ideological constructs, denaturalizing common sense and bringing to light conventions taken for granted. Language is seen as a social practice (Fairclough, 1989) through which meanings and values are expressed and reproduced. Oral or written words are not a mere representation of reality, but a modifying agent of reality itself. This implies that discourses and texts must be intended within a two-way relation with social structures: they shape them and vice versa. In other words, language is an action that produces meanings which acts concretely on institutions, daily life and social contexts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

CDA has investigated topics such as class and gender relations; political, institutional, media discourses; stereotypes and prejudices construction; commodification of social life. A discourse approach can also be used to study the environmental discourses, for example examining discursive strategies of different actors and investigating the meanings that such words like nature (Hansen, 2002, 2006) or climate change (Swyngedouw, 2010) take up time by time. The narratives about environment and ecological issues are socially built (Dryzek, 1997; Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999; Alexander, 2009). Several actors and different knowledge (climatologists, food multinationals, supranational and local institutions, etc.) contribute to the definition of this discursive field, in a debate particularly important because it determines the political decision making (Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). The statements that make it up are not neuter or merely descriptive. They rather express a partial and situated view and reflect positions which are difficult to conciliate (Myerson & Rydin, 1996). This multitude of voices has made the word environment an empty form, an ambiguous and conveniently meaningless term (Hobsbawm, 1994; Harvey, 1996).

Also the field of ecological stances is not a monolithic bloc but it even expresses opposing positions (Eckersley, 1992; Whatmore & Boucher, 1993; Dryzek, 1997). CDA allows picking out and isolating the elements of discourse linked to the social

changes. This is the case for the various economic translations of the environmental issues, recurring in public debate because they reflect and simultaneously enhance neoliberal political and social horizon. The current trend towards marketization pervades the social sphere, also through the colonisation of discursive practices by an economic and managerial discourse (Fairclough, 1995). By the application of the critical discourse analysis tools, we will try to illustrate these trends in the environmental discourse arena. Using Fairclough's work and Jager's Dispositive Analysis, we will investigate the linguistic devices related to environment and nature. The term device refers to Michel Foucault's thought and it shows the linkages between discursive formations and power structuring mechanisms. We also draw on Alexander work (2009), which has illustrated the ideological integration of environmentalist discourses into politics and economy with a CDA approach. Specifically we'll try to find in the selected texts the grammatical, semantic and argumentative aspects, the collective symbolisms, the metaphors and the wordplays which convey environment perception and representation. The purpose is to explain what is unsaid and what is taken for granted.

### **3. Environment and economy: a difficult integration. Three Italian case studies**

In the Italian legislation, for a long time, there have been no specific references to the environmental resources, to its ecological conservation, as well as soil conservation or public health (Cederna, 1975). The notion of environment has been initially absorbed in the wider notion of landscape, a concept that refers to the interaction between environment and anthropogenic changes. The *Testo Unico* on environment (D. lgs. no. 152 of 3 April 2006) was issued in 2006. However, it has not bridged the gap with reference to the other European Union countries. In 2013, Italy has gained a record of infractions due to the non transposition of the European Union law in the field of environment<sup>1</sup>. The rebukes concerned, among other things, damage and environmental liability, waste management, environmental impact assessment, use of harmful chemical substances. The picture of the building sector is no more rosy. From the 1950s to 2000, the urbanized area has increased by 500%; soil consumption from 1990s to 2005 was up to 3,5 million hectares (WWF 2009). The real estate market is impermeable from the law of supply and demand (Colombo, Laterza & Porcu, 2013), in a country that holds second place in Europe for cement production. This shows that the environment is easily subject to the interests of housing speculation (WWF, 2009). A similar situation concerns water management, as demonstrated by environmental disasters such as floods, and woodlands, because there is no framework legislation on forestry.

This brief digression on the Italian situation is intended to notice how the compromise between environment and economy is anything but solid. Legislation does not solve the precarious balance among elements placed at different levels,

<sup>1</sup> EU Commission on Environment and Policies, 11 September 2011, [www.serviziparlamentari.com](http://www.serviziparlamentari.com).



between a weak environmental protection and strong market actors. In the following three study cases we will show how the integration among economic interests and ecologist claims is anything but easy. Narratives on sustainability contribute to defusing an unsolved conflict, by using concealing strategies. In spite of the explicitly expressed intention to safeguard and protect the environment, the discursive strategies discussed below work at an implicit level. Here they seem to naturalize the exploitation of environmental resources, pursuing economic goals.

### 3.1. *The Decree “of doing”*

Decree Law no. 69 of 21 June 2013 «Urgent dispositions to restart the economy» has been considered by its promoters as the key normative element to revive Italian economy after a long period of downturn. Its political name (the so-called “*decreto del fare*”, *decree of doing*) makes us grasp its purpose: it is a tool intended to streamline Italian administrative and normative frames, also channelling public and private financing into the production processes.

Critical Discourse Analysis has been rarely applied to normative documents because these are unsuitable for a methodology working on slippages between registers and genres, metaphors, hypertextuality and intertextuality. Nevertheless, a law is the discourse that, most of all, is characterized as a power container (Jäger, 2001). Within the CDA theoretical system, there are some elements in favour of the application of this methodology to the normative texts.

The first element is the importance given by this type of analysis to the problem of access to the public discourse. If we consider a law as a “discourse”, it is clear that it can be produced only by the members of those groups able to mobilise the necessary resources to be elected in the legislature. We can point out two more reflections about the law as communication message. Facing discourses that require a certain quantity of technical knowledge on the topic, the recipient is more exposed to the contents of the message (Wodak, 1987). Secondly, there is a positive correlation between the social power held by the sender and the level of the recipient’s message acceptance (Nesler, Aguinis, Quigley & Tedeschi, 1993). The specialised terminology of a norm and the fact it is issued by the State, make it possible to impose itself to the recipients with an authority scarcely traceable in other cases.

Another argument concerns the importance given by CDA to the implicit and hidden dimensions of a text. This research of the non-immediately visible elements means trying to trace within the text the concealed premises and the social supposed knowledge (Van Dijk, 1989). The aim is to recognize the presence of possible elements belonging to a cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2007). A cultural hegemony presupposes an ideological system, which not only builds up the horizons of meaning to understand the world, but is also the basis of social practices, especially

those reproducing asymmetries in the relations (Van Dijk, 2004). Therefore, in our case we have to identify the elements suggesting a connection among the discourses concerning environment and the neoliberal frame.

As for the provisions concerning the environment, Decree Law no. 69 of 21 June 2013 puts them together under the Title II “Simplifications”. This is a strategic collocation, because this channels the legislative adjustments in a positive semantic sphere, particularly emphasized in the Italian political discourse, the one related to the need of reducing red tape on economic activities. This approach works implicitly as a strategy of argumentation, in order to create a relation with a metadiscourse (Fairclough, 1992) which can outwardly act as a legitimation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Viewed from a different perspective, the discourse concerning bureaucracy streamlining fits into the neoliberal trend towards deregulation (Daly & Goodland, 1994). In the text this shows the torsions that environmentalism can experience in its political integration (Alexander, 2009). A measure concerning the reuse in other sites of excavation heaps shows this aspect, limiting controls “to the excavation heaps coming from activities or works subject to environmental impact assessment” (Article 41, paragraph 2), thus modifying as a restrictive clause the previous regulations. In this case, the term environment works, paradoxically, as a limit on the controllability of the building material polluting power. The environmental impact assessment, provided by Italian legislation only for large-scale constructions, becomes a threshold below which worries about health risks and ecosystemic balances are abolished.

A provision with a similar meaning is contained in the previous paragraph: “only for groundwater cleaning-up, it is possible to reintroduce, after treatment, groundwater in the same aquifer from which they are drawn”. Compared with the previous legislation (Legislative Decree no. 152 of 3 April 2006, Article 243), this eliminates the point according to which this water should not contain other “harmful substances”. In this case, it is an omission to indicate again the deregulation aspect of the legislative text and the subordination of the environment.

Another important amendment to the previous legislation concerning groundwater clearly shows the short circuit of the relation between environment and economic needs. This is representative of the critical issues linked to the practical fulfilment of the concept of sustainable development. An instability arises within the compromise between environment and accounting criteria, fostering the second term. The Decree legislates (art. 41, cl. 1) that “if the contaminated groundwater creates a health risk, it is necessary to eliminate the contamination source whenever possible and economically sustainable and it is also necessary to adopt measures to moderate the spread of contamination...”.

Economic sustainability becomes the main criterion for the feasibility evaluation of groundwater reclamations, pushing public health into the background: health risk is less important than economic practicality. Moreover, the prevention of environmental damages is eliminated because, unlike the previous legislation, the reclamation doesn't concern contaminated water which does *not* imply a health risk for the population. The polluter-pays principle and the precautionary principle, rooted in the Community environmental legislation, are sacrificed, because of the pressures imposed by the economic crisis. There is also a problem of text coherence (Van Dijk, 2004). In the following articles of the act, we would expect precise technical references to health risk assessment procedures, to the parameters of economic sustainability and to the measures used to attenuate contaminations. Nevertheless, the legislative text just evokes them, without even specifying the institutional bodies charged with supervising clean-up operations.

### 3.2. *The regional landscape plan of Sardinia*

Sardinia, with a surface of around 24.000 square kilometres, is the second island of the Mediterranean Sea in terms of extension. Just a few kilometres from Corsica and about 100 from the Italian coast, it has experienced, over the centuries, a social and economic development marked by its insularity. Its boundaries have preserved local language and traditions but have also contributed to increase marginalization and infrastructural deficits. The economy, mainly focused on the third sector, has experienced from the 1950s a consistent development of tourist activities. These have been extensively supported by public funding and, to a greater extent, by foreign investments. Sardinia's beaches and crystal clear sea have recompensed the island with an international notoriety, enabling it to become a favourite destination both for elite and mass tourism.

The idea of a tourism-based development has influenced representations and discourses concerning the environment. This has been often seen by local governments as a mere means to sustain economic activities and to increase employment rate. Hotel and vacation houses have been built, radically transforming coastal areas. This touristic development focused on the building industry has been criticized for the lack of rules on behalf of property speculations (Cederna, 1975) and also for the selloff of large portions of territory, given away as commodities to foreign investors (Roggio, 2007). The regional government has limited building activity by adopting Regional Law 8 of 25 November 2004, the so-called "*coast saving plan*" and 2006 *Regional Landscape Plan*, aimed at identifying and protecting natural heritage. The new constraints have not been unanimously accepted. The opponents believe that the economic development of the island should go through the building of new structures for tourist purposes. Criticisms have converged in a new document, the *Sardinian Landscape Plan*, currently not yet in force. The legislative process has been supported by an institutional communication campaign.

In 2011, the Sardinia's regional government buy two pages of the two local newspapers so as to explain the need of a new regional landscape plan. The large letters draw the reader's attention. The purpose is not to inform but rather to persuade, according to logics of permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1982). In these articles there is no reference to the change undertaken. There are instead numerous allusions to the need to adjust the *Regional Landscape Plan* in force. The tone is emotional. It tries to involve the recipients by employing the plural first person. The pronoun "we" is frequently used, as well as the term "people", in one case qualified with the adjective "Sardinian".

The reference to the collective symbols (Jager, 2001) of identity and to a common membership is an expedient often used by political communication. In this case, the common ground between issuer and recipient also involves future generations. These ones are not intended in a generic sense but as "our children". The environment and the landscape do not have an intrinsic value. Their safeguard is subject to personal and situated interests (our own children, we, Sardinian people).<sup>2</sup> The call for a common social identity is a *topos* of institutional communications on *Sardinian Landscape Plan*. The redundancy of this type of utterance acts works as a naturalization device. The adjustment of previous plan seems natural and necessary because it is made in the interest of each islander, of this "we" that takes for granted the existence both of a community and of a common environment representation. More recently the current regional government has used multi-semiotic texts (Fairclough, 1995) combining language, images, videos and graphic design. The popularization of the new *Sardinian Landscape Plan* has been done through a facebook page<sup>3</sup>, showing in the title this catch-phrase: "Let's give Sardinia back to Sardinian people". The opposition between old and new is also graphically expressed as shown by the colours and the symbols used in the following images (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> This is the closing sentence: previous «Regional Landscape Plan was written imagining Sardinia like a land that must be protected from the people that inhabits it. We decided to totally rewrite it because, on the contrary, we ask that people, all the Sardinian people of any social and political colour, to protect the land where they live in and to give it to their children more beautiful and stronger».

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://it-it.facebook.com/pianopaesaggisticosardegna>.



Figure 1. Images on facebook page of Sardinian Landscape Plan

It is possible to link this type of communication to the human welfare ecology perspective (Eckersley, 1992). The value of the landscape is subject to its social and economic function. It is considered as a “good belonging to all Sardinian people. A fundamental right of the people. Of the territory. An essential condition for social and human well-being”. This point of view gets along with a more economic one, emerging from the guidelines following both the plans. In this regard, indeed, the new *Sardinian Landscape Plan* does not fundamentally alter the previous document but, on the contrary, it incorporates its overall view. This element of intertextuality is particularly relevant because it shows that reducing the environment within economic criteria is the dominant thinking in regional policy, regardless of the political party.

The Landscape Plan guidelines wants to go beyond an “aesthetical” and “eco-scientific” conception, towards a «balance between the pressures to protect the environment and to develop the economy, a balance which enables us on the one hand to fulfil people needs without prejudicing the capacity of future generations to fulfil their needs, on the other to generate an income, also in the immediate future». Within this framework, natural and environmental resources are considered an “added value”. It is necessary to keep their “quality and reproducibility” through a “rational and efficient use”. The landscape is defined as a “factor of local development” and a “competitive resource”. These lexical choices denote the integration of the environmental discourse within the economic sphere, in a costs-benefits analysis which requires efficient uses of scarce resources. The protection of natural heritage is exclusively managerial, as shown also by the negative meaning associate to the words “constraint” and “restriction”, which would hinder regional economic development.

Environment and landscape protection without any other purposes, thus seen from an ecocentric perspective, emerges only with reference to the past. In this case, the obfuscation of agency (Fairclough, 1989) enables to avoid clear references to the responsibility of negative impacts on the ecosystem. This strategy also allows concealing any casual connections. The responsibility for “irreversible effects and [for] the modifications concerning the environment and the landscape”, is placed in the last fifty years, as to lift current local administrators from any possible blame. The reference to the agency is not precise not only because it is placed in the past but also because it is impersonal: the responsibility is imputed to an unspecified “economic growth” and to the “transformations” concerning the territory.

### 3.3. *The coal-fired power station of Vado Ligure*

The coal-fired power station situated in Vado Ligure, a town with around 10.000 inhabitants in the north-west of Italy, is one of the most important power plants of the country in terms of produced energy (1460 MW). Built in 1970 by the “Ente Nazionale per L'Energia Elettrica” (ENEL), in 2003, within a wider privatisation of the public energy sector, it was sold to the company Tirreno Power. In 2012 the current ownership asked and obtained the authorization by the Minister for Economic Development to widen the powerhouse, including the building of a new unit with 460 MW.

From 2010, a social movement, deeply rooted in the town, has protested against the project. Furthermore, the protesters have started asking for the closure of the power station because of the high levels of air pollution. Quoting some epidemiological studies carried out by Italian and foreign universities and by the Italian Cancer Institute,<sup>4</sup> the supporters of this movement talk about hundreds of deaths caused by particulate emissions. The incidence of some illnesses – namely some forms of lung cancer and other diseases of the respiratory tract – is more than twice the rest of Italian population. The movement is backed by some representatives of Vado Ligure institutions and of another adjacent municipality. A Public Prosecutor opened an inquiry in 2010. Three years later, some Tirreno Power managers have been charged for “environmental disaster”. In March 2014 the power plant has been closed by the Public Prosecutor’s office.

Faced with this coalition, also supported by the local press, Tirreno Power has answered with a social communication focused on the compatibility between its own activity and the environment. This communication is the semiotic aspect (Fairclough, 2001) of a conflict and reveals its immediately pragmatic character, aiming to tackle the obstacles that jeopardize investments and planned profits. At a lexical level, there is a wide use of positively sounding words (Alexander, 2009), which channel the image of a business that, above any other aspect, considers

<sup>4</sup> The studies are available on the blog “United for the Health”, page <http://unitiperlasalute.blogspot.it>.

the relapse of its economic activities on urban ecosystem. This power station is “the most advanced in Europe in terms of technologies used and low environmental impact”; emission control procedures are “the best”; the relation with the local institutions and the citizenry is “open and transparent”; “the correct use of natural resources and raw materials” is “optimal”;<sup>5</sup> “the continuous improvement of the power station environmental performances is constantly pursued and supervised through the adoption of an Environmental Management System”. Simultaneously, the corporate environmentalism (Beder, 1997) of Tirreno Power counterattacks the opponents: the pollution allegations are “trivial”, worries stem from “unverified news”, and polemics are “useless and preconceived”.

This strategy of predication (Van Dijk, 2001) abuses the simple repetition of the word environment and of its derivatives, often written with capital letter. In its institutional brochure (18 pages, of which 11 empty or fully occupied by pictures) the term appears 17 times, once every 81 words; in two of the examined websites it is contained in 80% of the pages. In these recurrences, the term environment and its derivatives are often linked to expressions coming from the semantic sphere of economy: performance, investment, value. One of the business mission statements, as written in the brochure, is “Environmental Competitiveness. The primary objective is identifying and accomplishing the best environmental performances, taking into account people’s needs and the social context in which we work. The Company considers environmental indicators as the best control indexes of the production processes”.

These metaphors, *prima facie* oxymoronic, convey one of the fundamental semantic macrostructures of Tirreno Power social communications: there is no trade-off between business profit and environment safeguard. The manifesto of its environmental policy states that “Tirreno Power considers the protection of the environment one of its key values. Therefore, from its constitution, it pursues the objective to combine the production electrical power and the protection of the environment. Identifying and fulfilling the best environmental performances puts the company in line with a common feeling and brings prestige to its image, constituting at the same time an economic value”. The *2012 Environmental Declaration* emphasizes this attitude with a catch-phrase, prophesying favourable effects for everybody, including the population “Do not bow our head. / Face Stakeholders / With a win-win approach”. Instead, a trade-off is established between the planned investments – including the resulting jobs – and the judicial inquiries arisen on the initiative of the local authorities: “a further time dilation (after six years of preliminary investigation and one more year to discuss the appeals presented by the municipalities) [would imply] the concrete possibility of ... the disappearance of the conditions that, currently, enable the planned investments”.

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<sup>5</sup> These and the following sentences are taken from the websites [www.tirrenopower.com](http://www.tirrenopower.com) and [www.centralevaldigue.it](http://www.centralevaldigue.it).

This showing-off to care about pollution prevention is combined by Tirreno Power with lists reporting the enforced laws, the ministerial authorisations owned<sup>6</sup> and the procedures of environmental management set up by the company. This proximity represents the relation between the institutionalisation of ecological issues and the business greenwashing (Greer & Bruno, 1996). The footnote synthesis on environmental law, the related certifications such as Certiquality, EMAS and OHSAS, the publication of tables containing data concerning emissions, boost and legitimize ecologist declarations of the company management. The latter, in fact, appears as the authentic possessor of a comprehensive knowledge about the environment. Interlaced with pictures of smokestacks under the blue sky and smiling children with the protective helmet, this *pastiche* of good intentions, tables, scientific and jurisprudential discourses is a small knowledge/power *dispositif*.

### Conclusion

The three selected case studies are intentionally different. In the first place, they are dissimilar types of text: a normative document, an institutional communication, some business communications. Their difference also lies in the geographical levels they involve: the whole national territory, an island region, a municipality of Northern Italy. In spite of these differences, the common ground concerns the discourse construction, the communicative strategies employed and the discursive practices used. All the three case studies refer to an unequal power distribution among who can produce a public discourse and the recipients. In these texts, the legislator, a regional government or an energy company become the depositaries of the knowledge concerning the environment and its protection.

An ideological element that they share is the importance given to the private. In the first case, deregulation and red tape streamlining procedures are called to boost economic action. In the second case, easing the environmental constraints on the territory should stimulate new private investments. In the third one, a company reassures about its environment care and complains of its legal problems and people's concern about air pollution. In all three examples, as shown by the use of a lexicon belonging to the semantic sphere of economy, an anthropocentric conception prevails, wherein the environment protection is subject to private interests.

Environmentalism is no more a question of radical social movements. If the "decree of doing" witnesses the institutionalisation of environmental issues, and the *Regional Landscape Plan* witnesses their politicization, Tirreno Power's case explains the paradoxes concerning the integration of the environment into the economic world. Here the environment becomes part of a business communication,

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<sup>6</sup> In 2009 it was granted by the Environment Minister the VIA ("Valutazione di Impatto Ambientale", the English Environmental Impact Assessment); in 2012 it was followed by the "Autorizzazione Integrata Ambientale" (Italian name for the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control).



with the purpose of embellishing the image of an enterprise which transforms energy in coal, with an undeniable polluting effect on the environment.

To conclude, these three instances show that nowadays the redundancy of environmentalist discourses produces as a sort of insignificance of them. Today no one can oppose or neglect the environmental issues. Therefore, looking at the surface of discourses, it is no more possible to understand if this interest has effective consequences at the level of practices. In other words it's impossible to say if there is any correspondence between the statements and a concrete protection of nature. A critical analysis of the discourses allows to detect the implicit assumptions, bringing back to light the anything but solved conflicts between economic growth and nature, between development and environmental protection.

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